Public Eye

Diversity for some at Air Academy High

by Cara DeGette

Here is a peculiar story about what happens when you ask School District 20 bureaucrats about a student club designed to celebrate diversity — except for when diversity involves gays and lesbians — at Air Academy High School.

First, meet **Sara Horton**. She is one of many brave students at Air Academy in northern Colorado Springs, a school where the vast majority of students are white and middle- to upper-class. Horton belongs to her school's **Diversity Club**, a group of 10 to 15 students who regularly meet to talk about the rich and often complex mosaic of man- and womankind.

The Diversity Club, formerly called Helping Other People Excel (HOPE), is one of 32 student organizations recognized by the school as an "official" club. That means students can meet during regular class time, use the school's public address system to advertise upcoming meetings and events, freely post promotional posters — and enjoy the feeling that comes with being acknowledged as belonging to a *legitimate* group.

Horton is also a founding member of Air Academy's **Gay-Straight Alliance** — which is decidedly *not* an officially sanctioned club. The GSA, which meets weekly during lunchtime, is one of six student groups that cannot use the public address system or enjoy other benefits that come with being blessed by school officials.

For what it's worth, nearly twice as many students have been attending meetings of the GSA, which just formed this school year, than those of the Diversity Club. Horton chalks that up to the fact that the subject matter is so topical. "By far, more people are concerned about gay issues than celebrating their diversity," she says.

These students celebrate diversity at Air Academy High School. Top row, left to ri senior Samantha Bainbridge, senior Stephanie Dlimar and junior Kellie Clark. Bottom row, left to right: junior Sara Hort junior Brenden McHenry and senior Chris Rowland.

Photo By Bruce El

And here's the rub: Though it would seem evident that diversity and gays and lesbians go hand-in-glove, District 20 bureaucrats reject that notion, without reservation. Here are the levels of absurdity to which they are willing to stoop to stake their claim:

Last month, members of the Diversity Club attended the annual State High School Diversity Conference at Cherry Creek High School in Englewood. Air Academy officials allowed the students to go to the Saturday event with an important caveat: They had to promise they would not attend any panel discussions that even touched on the topic of gays and lesbians.

In less than two weeks, starting on April 3, the Diversity Club is sponsoring the school's annual Diversity Week. One day, the kids will bring in different ethnic foods to share; on another, a panel discussion will feature students talking about various cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Other scheduled events will incorporate hugs and drum circles and a film about African children living in war zones.

One topic that won't come up — and that, in fact, has been expressly *prohibited* from being discussed ——is, you guessed it, anything having to do with gays and lesbians.

"It seems weird to me," Horton says. "We're a club that is supposed to support diversity. Homosexuality is a major point of life these days. Sooner or later, everyone has to deal with it. It just seems a little ridiculous."

That sounds jarringly like the message expressed over in District 11, another Colorado Springs school district. Last year, bureaucrats there were so fraught with fear over the potential for public controversy that they similarly

attempted to relegate a Gay-Straight Alliance at Palmer High School to second-tier status. A lawsuit and nearly a half-million dollars later, D-11 eventually backed down, agreeing to recognize the club.

A phone call to Air Academy High School officials was in order. Reached last Friday, the school's dean of students **Mike Sibley**, immediately asked whether I had gotten "clearance" to interview him from the school district's public information officer, **Nanette Anderson**. "She tells me what I can and cannot say," Sibley said.

Once such "clearance" was subsequently obtained, Sibley confirmed that the school's Diversity Club is officially recognized; the Gay-Straight Alliance is not. The distinction — and this is where it gets a bit murky — is that diversity issues are part of the school's curriculum, but gay and lesbian issues are not.

"It is a curricular club doing a curricular purpose," said Sibley of the Diversity Club. "They have to follow what is in our curriculum."

Deciphering this explanation was a bit complicated, so I tried another question: Is the issue of homosexuality ever discussed at Air Academy, or is it prohibited? Sibley responded with this: "There is no curricula taught in regard to that."

Frankly, I still wasn't tracking, and when Sibley started talking about how this topic was a "building-level issue," I politely asked him what *that* meant. Just as cordially, he replied, "I'm going to stop our conversation now." He wanted the opportunity, he said, to confer with his principal and other administrators.

Four hours later, Anderson, the district's spokeswoman, sent an unsolicited, three-paragraph e-mail "response." Her gist was that "alternative lifestyles and gay and lesbian issues are not part of the curriculum at [Air Academy]" and therefore, the students cannot talk about those issues in an officially sanctioned forum.

Not to be outdone, school principal **Erik Fredell** sent a "special delivery" e-mail on Monday to "Kadets and Kadet Supporters" (in reference to the school's mascot), alerting them that this newspaper was planning to write about the Diversity Club's upcoming weeklong series of events. The principal's message read like a cryptogram: "The report questioned our administration's decision to deny a specific activity that the host curriculum club had asked to present."

Desperate to sift through the codespeak, we found Air Academy's Statement of Core Beliefs, published right on the school's Web site. Neither the principal nor the dean of students had alluded to these core beliefs when discussing their school's policies and current practices. And with good reason. These are three of the seven:

• "Individual differences, non-traditional learning modes, and creativity will be valued."

• "Our school will be safe; nevertheless, conflict will occur and be addressed by dialogue."

• "We are role models for students, and what we do is more important than what we say."

In light of their current *modus operandi*, administrators might want to amend that last one. Something along the lines of: Do as we say, not as we do.